



Administering horizontal policy issues in the Government of Canada

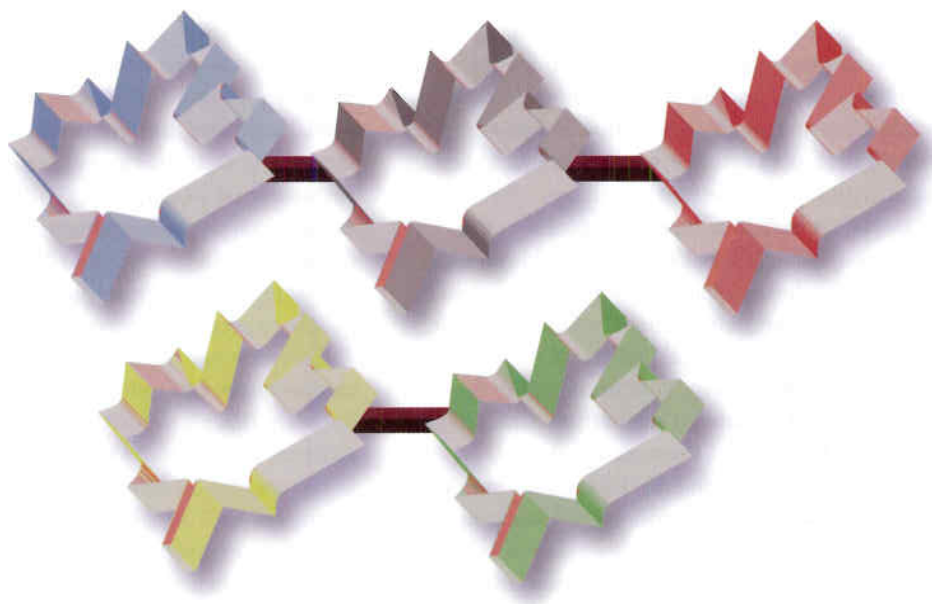
Breaking down organizational silos and thinking and acting corporately are at the core of successful horizontal issue management.

By Alan Young

Managing public policy issues, including hosting a successful Olympic Games, is an increasingly complex business. Managing them well is a significant achievement for government. More often than not, policy issues such as climate change, public security in a post 9-11 world, and Aboriginal affairs do not fit comfortably within the “box” of a single government department or agency. They can cut across several organizational lines, requiring the active engagement of public servants with a wide variety of expertise and experience and demanding the attention of several government ministers.

One size does not fit all

What does horizontal issue management mean? To quote Mel Cappe, former clerk of the Privy Council in a 2001 speech, working horizontally “means being able to work in teams and networks across organizational silos; to think and act corporately ... the public service is in a post-structural era; where power is exercised through networks, where influence is derived from cooperation ...”¹ Cappe may have been overly optimistic about being in a post-structural era but his idea of breaking down organizational silos and thinking and acting corporately are at the core of successful horizontal issue management.



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arrangements where dedicated staffing, multi-year financial commitments and agreed-upon outcomes are formalized using instruments such as a memorandum of understanding. Further, horizontal issues can involve other levels of government and private sector partners, adding layers of complexity to the exercise. (This article focuses solely on horizontal issue management within the federal government.)

Managing horizontally within a vertical institution

Canadian experience makes it clear that the single greatest challenge to successful horizontal issue management is that lines of accountability must remain vertical even though government departments collaborate on horizontal projects. At its roots, the Government of Canada is a vertical institution. Ministerial responsibility is a fundamental principle of Canada's Westminster model of government wherein individual ministers are held accountable to Parliament for what takes place in their respective departments. This principle must be respected even when several departments collaborate to manage a successful policy outcome for Canadians. Moreover, critical support systems such as databases, financial management systems, budgeting, audit and evaluation functions and accountability frameworks are often vertical. Consequently, vertical accountability measures often direct how complex horizontal policy issues are managed. As one recent study starkly states,

"The reality of working horizontally in a vertical institutional setting means linking back to the vertical structure that is normally the source of funding and authority. Neglecting these links can be fatal. Strong vertical links are as important as strong horizontal links. Without vertical support, horizontal initiatives are vulnerable."²²

The considerable challenge of managing horizontally within a vertical institution becomes clear when examining issues of governance and accountability. Governance answers the question, "Who participates and how?" It is essential at the outset to clearly identify the partners who will be engaged on an initiative and to define the role(s) each will play. Furthermore, governance arrangements may result in a distribution of decision-making powers amongst the partners.

Once governance issues are dealt with, the next major item to address is accountability. Accountability answers the question, "Who is responsible to whom and for what?" In the case of horizontal policy issues, the reality is that dual accountabilities exist. There is horizontal accountability, with each partner being accountable to all of the others for fulfilling their respective roles. At the same time, there is vertical accountability, in which each participating department and agency must respect the principle of ministerial accountability to Parliament. Thus, even though a governance model may distribute decision making, thereby breaking down institutional silos within government, individual departmental/ministerial accountability must be maintained.

Parliamentarians must develop new mechanisms to ensure that ministers involved in horizontal policy initiatives are more appropriately held accountable.

Hallmarks of success

The challenges to successful horizontal policy management in a vertical institutional setting are significant, but not insurmountable. Experience with numerous federal horizontal policy initiatives demonstrates that the following can contribute to successful outcomes:

- Leadership is generally identified as the key driver of success. In addition to strong leadership on the ground, it is critical to have the support of senior public servants, preferably deputy ministers, at the outset of a major horizontal initiative.
- Central agencies, particularly the Privy Council Office and the Treasury Board secretariat, must be engaged early to ensure that there is a clear understanding of whole-of-government priorities and objectives and that appropriate risk management and accountability frameworks are in place.
- Identifying a lead department, preferably a large one with significant financial resources can provide direction and support to other, smaller, partners. In addition, a dedicated secretariat for large projects can provide sound planning and governance support.
- Public servants must see viable career paths are available to them by being engaged on long-term horizontal initiatives.
- For major projects, multi-year funding commitments can help to ensure that staff are not "left out to dry," wondering if their positions will be supported at each fiscal year-end.
- An accountability framework must be established that includes: a clear articulation of expected outcomes; transparent reporting of results to ministers (and through them to Parliament), partners, and citizens; and management and measurement systems to ensure

